

## **Lehi Caught Up in the Sack of Jerusalem**

The *Book of Mormon* account of the events leading up to the arrival of an Israelite population in the New World begins “in the commencement of the first year of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah” (1 Nephi 1:4). In a vision, Lehi, a Prophet read the words, “Wo, wo, unto Jerusalem, for I have seen thine abominations!” He learned “that it should be destroyed, and the inhabitants thereof; many should perish by the sword, and many should be carried away captive into Babylon.” (1 Nephi 1:13) Nephi makes the sequence of events clear, speaking of “the destruction that should come upon them, immediately after my father left Jerusalem.” (2 Nephi 25:10) Lehi went out to prophesy to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and call them to repentance. The Jews [Judeans] became angry with him, mocked him and sought his life. Returning to his home, God commanded him “that he should take his family and depart into the wilderness.” (1 Nephi 2:2) Obeying, he “left his house, and the land of his inheritance, and his gold, and his silver, and his precious things.” Clearly, he was prosperous.

The party leaving Jerusalem is eventually made up of Lehi, his wife Sariah, their sons Laman, Lemuel, Sam and Nephi, plus Ishmael, his wife, two sons and five daughters. A servant is included, Zoram, and after the birth to Lehi of Jacob and Joseph in the desert, and death of Ishmael, the number boarding their ship on the Arabian coast of the Indian Ocean is seventeen. Lehi (and possibly Ishmael as well) is a descendant of Joseph of Egypt, making this group a branch of the tribe of Joseph. *Book of Mormon* dating is largely based on their departure from Jerusalem, or the number of years after that signal event. In several places, it is made clear that the birth of Jesus is 600 years after their departure from Jerusalem, which makes this event 600 BCE by the Gregorian calendar (1 Nephi 10:4, 19:8, 2 Nephi 25:19 & 3 Nephi 1:1). After eight years in the wilderness, they set sail for the New World.

This Israelite departure happens in three stages. First, the family of Lehi travel into the wilderness and eventually camp near the Dead Sea in Arabia. Then Nephi and his elder brothers are sent back again, this time to get some brass plates found in the possession of Laban, a military commander. These, often called the Brass Plates of Laban, contain the Bible up to and including the first part of Jeremiah, translated into ancient Egyptian. To succeed in this task, Nephi kills Laban with his own sword. A servant of Laban, Zoram, is persuaded to join Lehi’s

party. Finally, Nephi with his two elder brothers is sent back to get the family of Ishmael, primarily to provide daughters to marry Lehi's sons. All of these people, and the sword and Brass Plates of Laban, are essential components of the account in First Nephi of the Israelite departure to their very own promised land in the New World.

### Sources

We are fortunate to have interlocking historical information for the important events pertinent to the period from Lehi's call to his departure from Jerusalem. These are from both Biblical and Babylonian sources. The former is First and Second Kings (originally a single work), First and Second Chronicles (also originally a single work), two Jeremiahs and Ezekiel. The Babylonian sources are the *Babylonian Chronicle* and the *Jehoiachin Ration Tablets*.

*The Books of the Kings* give an account that tends to resemble our concept of a history. We do not know the author(s), and it certainly had its own redaction history. But it does make reference to earlier sources, including a *Book of the Acts of Solomon*, *The Annals of the Kings of Judah* and *The Chronicles of the Kings of Israel*. Unfortunately, all three are lost works.

*Chronicles* is largely drawn from other books of the Bible. It very probably had additional sources.

*Jeremiah* should, in theory, be reliable, since he was present for all of the events we shall discuss. Unfortunately, opinions vary considerably regarding the redaction history. As in the case of Isaiah, scholars have found evidence to indicate that this work has, as its core, various materials from Jeremiah himself, other, often linking materials to tie these all together into a flowing history, and yet more material edited into the text somewhat later. The most telling evidence is the fact that the text of the Greek Septuagint version is around one eighth shorter than the Hebrew Masoretic text. Yet both versions have been evidenced in Hebrew texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Most scholars believe that the shorter Hebrew text that was translated into Greek is older than the longer Masoretic text, which was expanded with later additions.

*Ezekiel* was exiled to Babylon with thousands of others along with the boy king Jehoiachin in 597 BCE. He is important here as a Judean source in Babylon who can testify to the exile of Jehoiachin: "In the fifth day of the month, which was the fifth year of king Jehoiachin's captivity, The word of the LORD came expressly unto Ezekiel the priest" (1:2-3). He refers to Jehoiachin as *melek* (king), but to Zedekiah

as *nāšī'* (headman, chief), possibly because he was installed by Babylon to be its client king in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

The *Babylonian Chronicles* are a series of tablets that contain the more important events of each previous year. The *Jehoiachin Ration Tablets* contain decrees establishing the grain and oil rations for the exiled Judean boy king Jehoiachin. These sources are primarily of great importance because they corroborate pertinent Biblical material.

### Historical Jerusalem

By 600 BCE, the northern Kingdom of Israel no longer exists due to the attacks by the Assyrians. War and other geopolitical competition had been going on between Babylon and Egypt for control of Palestine and parts of Syria, and Babylon had gotten effective control over all the land from “the river of Egypt unto the river Euphrates.” (2 Kings 24:7) Even so, some Judean rebels unwisely hoped that they could use an alliance with Egypt as leverage against Babylon.

In 609 BCE, the pharaoh Necho II deposed the king of Judah, Jehoahaz and placed Eliakim on the throne. His name was changed to Jehoiakim. In 605 BCE Babylon defeated the Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish. In the same year Nebuchadnezzar II ascended to the throne, and besieged Jerusalem. Jehoiakim changed his allegiance to Babylon to avoid bloodshed, but changed his allegiance back to Egypt in 601. The Babylonian army besieged Jerusalem for three months, during which time Jehoiakim died. He was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin, also known by a name variant, Jeconiah. Second Chronicles gives his age as eight when ascending to the throne, but Second Kings gives it as eighteen. This is probably a copy error. After only three months on the throne, he, his mother and the entire palace staff went out and surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar, who promptly exiled them to Babylon.

The fact of the exile of Jehoiachin is clear first from the account of Ezekiel (1:1), and from a Babylonian decree to establish Jehoiachin's rations. The historicity of the Sack of Jerusalem is noted in the *Babylonian Chronicles*, and the accompanying exile, by far the largest in the series of three exiles to Babylon, is beyond doubt.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Iain Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 18-25.

<sup>2</sup> Pearce, L. E. and C. Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* (Bethesda, MD: Cornell Univ. Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology 28, 2014).

The Babylonian Chronicle gives the date of the surrender as March 16, 597,<sup>3</sup> and states that Nebuchadnezzar appointed a king of his own choice. “And the king of Babylon made Mattaniah his [Jehoiachin’s] father’s brother king in his stead, and changed his name to Zedekiah.” (2 Kings 24:17) “And [the king of Babylon] hath taken of the king’s seed, and made a covenant with him [Mattaniah/Zedekiah], and hath taken an oath of him: he hath also taken the mighty of the land.” (Ezekiel 17:13; v. 17:13-18)

At some point late in Zedekiah’s eleven-year reign, he fell in with the Judean rebels and, in spite of the strong remonstrances of Jeremiah, Baruch and Neriah, as well of some advisers and family, he entered into alliance with Egypt and withheld tribute. Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem for about thirty months, when, in the eleventh year of his reign, Zedekiah and his followers attempted to flee, but were captured on the plains of Jericho. He and his family were taken to Riblah in the district of Hamath, north of Damascus, where he was forced to witness the execution of his sons. His eyes were then gouged out and he was taken captive to Babylon. The status of a captive in Babylon was far worse than that of the exiles. First Nephi lumps the Sack of Jerusalem of 597 BCE into this later Babylonian conquest.

Table 1. Babylonian Documents re the Sack of Jerusalem

The Babylonian Chronicle
He [Nebuchadnezzar] camped against the city of Judah [Jerusalem] and on the second day of the month of Adar he took the city and captured the king [Jehoiachin]. He appointed a king of his own choice there [Zedekiah], took its heavy tribute and brought them to Babylon. [March 16, 597 BC]
Two Jehoiachin Ration Tablets
1. “10 (sila of oil) to the king of Judah, Yaukin [Jehoiachin]; 2 1/2 sila (oil) to the offspring of Judah’s king; 4 sila to eight men from Judea.” 2. “1 1/2 sila (oil) for three carpenters from Arwad, 1/2 apiece; 11 1/2 sila for eight wood workers from Byblos. . . ; 3 1/2 sila for seven Greek craftsman, 1/2 sila apiece; 1/2 sila to the carpenter, Nabuetir; 10 sila to Ia-ku-u-ki-nu [Jehoiachin], the son of Judah’s king [Jehoiakim]; 2 1/2 sila for the five sons of the Judean king.” [Note that some sounds in Hebrew do not occur in Babylonian. Jehoiachin, in the Hebrew of this period, is Yehoyakin.]

<sup>3</sup> Parker, Richard A., and Waldo H Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology: 626 B.C. - A.D. 75* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1956).

We thus have two major events, the Sack of Jerusalem at the time of Zedekiah's ascension to the throne, and the destruction of the temple, palace and walls of Jerusalem at the end of Zedekiah's rule. In the Sack of Jerusalem, the city was thoroughly plundered of the precious moveable items, including the vessels of the temple, and other gold and silver items in the temple and palace.

### **The Exiles: Who and How Many?**

The Sack of Jerusalem was devastating. One account is in 2 Kings 24:13-16:

13. And he carried out thence all the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king's house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold which Solomon king of Israel had made in the temple of the LORD, as the LORD had said.

14. And he carried away all Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the mighty men of valour, even ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths: none remained, save the poorest sort of the people of the land.

15. And he carried away Jehoiachin to Babylon, and the king's mother, and the king's wives, and his officers, and the mighty of the land, [those] carried he into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon.

16. And all the men of might, even seven thousand, and craftsmen and smiths a thousand, all that were strong and apt for war, even them the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon.

Some consider verse 14 to be an addition, and give preference to the figures in verse 16 (eight thousand exiles). By contrast, the Masoretic version of Jeremiah (52:28) gives us a much smaller number. "This is the people whom Nebuchadnezzar carried away captive: in the seventh year three thousand Jews and three and twenty" [i.e. in the 597 exile]. But we have to consider the fact that Jeremiah 52:28-30 is absent in the Septuagint, and so these verses may have been added in a later redaction that eventually resulted in the Masoretic text, of which the KJV is a translation. If so, added by whom, and when? Even so, 3,023 exiles is large by contrast with the number this version of Jeremiah gives for the two following exiles: 832 at the end of Zedekiah's reign, and 745 in the 23<sup>rd</sup> year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, in 582-81 BCE (Jeremiah 52:29-30).

Since the numbers given in Second Kings are rounded off in thousands, they cannot be the actual numbers. Some scholars prefer to use the figure given in Jeremiah. Others base their estimates on the categories included in the exile, and arrive at more mid-range estimates.

As for these categories, in addition to those found in 2 Kings 24:14 (“the princes, and all the mighty men of valour...the craftsmen and smiths”), more information regarding “who” is found in a letter from Jeremiah to the exiles before the fall of Zedekiah (Jeremiah KJV 29:1-2; Septuagint 36:1):

1. Now these [are] the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem unto the residue of the elders which were carried away captives, and to the priests, and to the prophets, and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon.
2. (After that Jeconiah the king, and the queen, and the eunuchs, the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, and the carpenters, and the smiths, were departed from Jerusalem;) (parentheses are original)

So, the exile included elders and priests as well. Here, “residue of the elders” is understood to mean those that were still alive at the time of the letter. Scholars study every passage in the OT where these terms occur (elders, princes, mighty men of valor) to determine what sort of status is involved in each case. Collectively, they refer to “persons of high status, wealth, power and honor.”<sup>4</sup> As for the total number in the 597 exile, in view of the general reliability of Second Kings, the dubious redaction history of Jeremiah, and the absence of any numbers in the Septuagint version of Jeremiah, it seems reasonable to opt for some mid-range total.

Moreover, the *Jewish Encyclopedia*<sup>5</sup> states that these are only the men, and the total number of exiled persons has to be three to four times these numbers, or, in 597 BCE, a minimum of 9,000 persons, based on Jeremiah, or 24,000 based on 2 Kings 24:16. So then, if we use the figure of 9,000 from Jeremiah, and a Jerusalem population of 80,000, then the exiles would minimally constitute eleven percent, or most of those in the upper echelons. By any estimate, this was by far the largest Judean captivity, and truly one that must have totally disrupted all social, religious and economic life in Jerusalem.

We need to know what this is as compared to the total population of Jerusalem. This should not be confused with the total for Judea, the entire kingdom. Estimating this population in 597 BCE is not a simple matter. The maximalist view places it around 100,000. The minimalist

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<sup>4</sup> Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem. Judah under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 58, notes 81 & 82.

<sup>5</sup> “Babylonian Captivity,” (*Jewish Encyclopedia* online, 2002; accessed 18 June 2019).

view places it at about 20,000. Some scholars go once again for a mid-range figure, between 60,000 and 80,000. As in other early populations, there was no middle class. A relatively small proportion was in the upper end of the socio-economic continuum, while most might have qualified as the “the poorest sort of the people of the land.” Clearly, the removal to Babylon of those of this upper group would have had a devastating effect on the city.

It is interesting to note the different perspectives of the OT prophets and of Babylon. In the view of the former, the major onus for this disaster is placed on the Judeans who have violated the covenant Yahweh had made with the chosen people. Babylon is God’s instrument to chastise them. On the other hand, Babylon wants to keep Judea as a functioning economy capable of meeting its tribute obligations. It is interesting to note that Ezekiel was exiled to Babylon, while Jeremiah was not. Jeremiah’s exemption might be explained by that fact that he was an adamant opponent to the Judean rebels. He urged accepting the Babylonian yoke. For example, in Jeremiah 27:

8. And it shall come to pass, that the nation and kingdom which will not serve the same Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, and that will not put their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation will I punish, saith the LORD, with the sword, and with the famine, and with the pestilence, until I have consumed them by his hand.

11. But the nations that bring their neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him, those will I let remain still in their own land, saith the LORD; and they shall till it, and dwell therein.

12. I spake also to Zedekiah king of Judah according to all these words, saying, Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live.

Clearly, Jeremiah was of greater use to Nebuchadnezzar in Jerusalem than in exile. Ezekiel, on the other hand, identifies himself as a priest. In 597 he seems to be around 25 years old, and may have been officiating in the temple. His inclusion among the exiles may be solely due to this status (Jeremiah 29:1; Ezekiel 1:3).

The exile of the men of valor (military men) is intended to keep Jerusalem defenseless. It may also have included “all that were strong and apt for war” (2 Kings 24:16; young strong men who potentially could be recruited or pressured to join a future rebellion against Babylon). This would include the sons of Lehi.

The exile of the craftsmen is a standard way to acquire skilled personnel to maximize the glory of Babylon. For example, Timur the

Lame (Tamerlane) routinely exiled all the artisans and builders to his capital Samarkand and made it into a magnificent garden city. A historian contemporary to the Ottoman conquest of Egypt, Ibn Iyas, described the wholesale exile of Egyptian craftsmen to Istanbul (c. 1517).

### **Lehi's Jerusalem**

The author of 1 Nephi, working in the late 1820's, must have been totally focused on the destruction of the temple. This could explain how he could have merged the events of the 597 Sack of Jerusalem into the destruction of Jerusalem in the eleventh year of Zedekiah's reign, thereby creating a historically impossible scenario for the *Book of Mormon*. On the other hand, we should not be too hard on him. As far as I can determine, this fatal flaw was not detected until attention was drawn to it in the first edition of *Mormon Genesis*.<sup>6</sup>

The Sack of Jerusalem was the day before the commencement of Zedekiah's rule. For at least one year, Jerusalem must have been in total turmoil. Yet, 1 Nephi is totally unaware of this devastating cataclysm and warns regarding it as a disaster that has yet to happen. It depicts the first year of the reign of Zedekiah as a period of warning: "and in that same year there came many prophets, prophesying unto the people that they must repent, or the great city Jerusalem must be destroyed." Nephi says of his older brothers, "Neither did they believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed according to the words of the prophets" (1 Nephi 2:13). In the many passages that refer to the future destruction of Jerusalem, there is no mention of the Sack of Jerusalem that happened just days or weeks before they set out for their promised land.

Worse yet, principal characters in 1 Nephi would have been caught up in the exile, along with Ezekiel and thousands of others. Much or all of the cast would not have been available to enact the departure drama. The Babylonian exile would have targeted the following:

1. The BoM describes Lehi as being quite prosperous. When he left Jerusalem, "he left his house, and the land of his inheritance, and his gold, and his silver, and his precious things (1 Nephi 2:4). Certainly he was not one of the poorest of the land. Furthermore, also as a prophet, Lehi would be among the exiles. The exile of prophets at this time is documented among the addressees in Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur Chris Eccel, *Mormon Genesis* (Hilo, HI: GPTouchstone, 2018), 91-94.

Babylon (Jeremiah 29:1).

2. Nephi describes himself as “being a man large in stature, and also having received much strength of the Lord” (1 Nephi 4:31). He was armed with a unique steel bow (1 Nephi 16:18). Certainly he fits the bill as being “strong and apt for war.” Laman and Lemuel also had special bows, which had “lost their springs” (1 Nephi 16:21). Lehi and his family would have been getting situated in their Babylonian exile, rather than trekking across Arabia to the Indian Ocean and the promised land.

3. We are told little about the background of Ishmael. He and his family most probably not among the poorest of the land.

4. Laban was a major military leader. Laman and Lemuel murmured, “Behold, he [Laban] is a mighty man, and he can command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty; then why not us?” (Nephi 3:31) When Nephi slays and beheads him, he finds him in a breastplate, and bearing an amazing sword: “the hilt thereof was of pure gold, and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine, and I saw that the blade thereof was of the most precious steel” (1 Nephi 4:9). His possession of brass plates written in Egyptian, which the Babylonian military could not read, may have incriminated him as a conspirator with the Egyptians. Clearly Laban would either have been executed by the Babylonians, or exiled. Such a warrior would not have escaped the exile dragnet, nor his precious military equipment. His sword and the bows of Nephi, Laman and Lemuel, would have been seized by Babylonian troops to grace the collections in the royal armory.

5. According to the servant of Laban, his master had been out with the elders of the Jews. The elders possessed secular rather than priesthood authority. In *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, David Rensberger rehearses the functions found in their connection in various passages of the OT: “groups called elders serve a variety of functions in various contexts throughout the OT. Elders sometimes represent the whole people or individual cities (Exodus, Deuteronomy, Judges); sometimes they serve as a governing authority (Joshua, Kings, Ezra); sometimes as judges (Deuteronomy, Ruth, Kings) and sometimes as advisers (Samuel, Kings).<sup>7</sup> The exile of the elders of the Jews is documented. They too are

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<sup>7</sup> David Rensberger, “Elder,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: 2000), 388. See this source for the specific Biblical references.

among those mentioned in the Babylonian exile to whom Jeremiah sent his letter (Jeremiah 29:1). Should a Commander Laban have been drinking with the elders of the Jews in the commencement of the first year of Zedekiah, they would be quaffing Babylonian beers in the balmy breezes somewhere between the Tigris and Euphrates.

6. Babylon had to import both copper and tin to make brass. Jeremiah (52:17-22) records that when the temple was pulled down in the eleventh year of Zedekiah, it was stripped of the brass accoutrements that had been used to make decorative and ritual components.

17. Also the pillars of brass that were in the house of the LORD, and the bases, and the brasen sea that was in the house of the LORD, the Chaldeans brake, and carried all the brass of them to Babylon. 18. The caldrons also, and the shovels, and the snuffers, and the bowls, and the spoons, and all the vessels of brass wherewith they ministered, took they away. 19. And the basons, and the firepans, and the bowls, and the caldrons, and the candlesticks, and the spoons, and the cups; that which was of gold in gold, and that which was of silver in silver, took the captain of the guard away. 20. The two pillars, one sea, and twelve brasen bulls that were under the bases, which king Solomon had made in the house of the LORD: the brass of all these vessels was without weight. 21. And concerning the pillars, the height of one pillar was eighteen cubits; and a fillet of twelve cubits did compass it; and the thickness thereof was four fingers: it was hollow. 22. And a chapter of brass was upon it; and the height of one chapter was five cubits, with network and pomegranates upon the chapters round about, all of brass. The second pillar also and the pomegranates were like unto these. 23. And there were ninety and six pomegranates on a side; and all the pomegranates upon the network were an hundred round about.

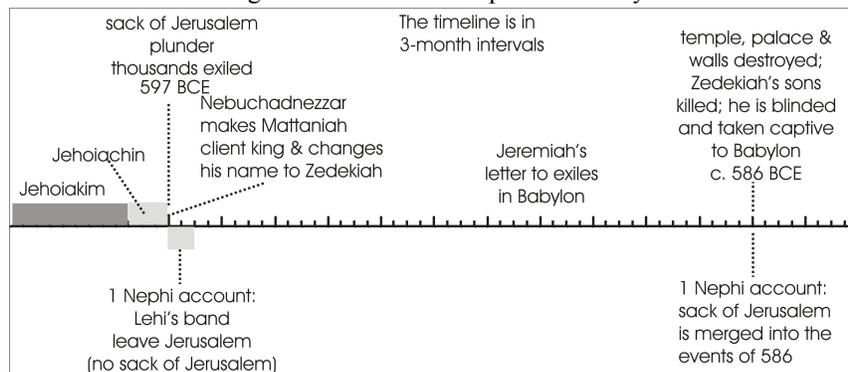
This passage shows the huge value that the Babylonians put on brass. Although they spared the temple and palace in 597, they could not have missed the treasury of Laban, and the brass plates. These would certainly have been included in the booty collected on the eve of the ascension of Zedekiah to the throne, and would not be present at the commencement of his reign. They would have been melted down and made into luxury or utilitarian articles in Babylon.

The authors were keen to report on the Babylonian exile. Unaware of the Sack of Jerusalem, and so speaking of the future, in 1 Nephi 1:13 (cf. 10:3), Lehi read in vision that “many should be carried away into Babylon.” After eight years in the wilderness, once in the New World Lehi received a vision that Jerusalem had been destroyed, and later

Jacob stated that, “those who were at Jerusalem...have been slain and carried away captive.” (2 Nephi 6:8) These statements are subsequent to the second Babylonian attack in the eleventh year of Zedekiah, when a far smaller exile was carried out. The Nephi narrative is totally unaware that a by far greater exile had already happened, just weeks before Lehi in Jerusalem was sent to warn its residents that lest they repent they would face conquest, death by the sword and exile.

◆ Moreover, Lehi was in need of provisions and tents (1 Nephi 2:4). They would have had a difficult if not impossible time to acquire the essentials needed to survive in the wilderness and across Arabia. Nebuchadnezzar’s army would have requisitioned all riding and transport animals, as well as all foodstuffs for the troops and to feed the thousands of exiles during an arduous trip to Babylon.

Figure 1. Timeline: 1 Nephi vs. History



◆ The events of 1 Nephi could not have taken place on the heels of the Sack of Jerusalem, with no awareness of it, no awareness of many killed and the thousands exiled to Babylon, including priests and prophets, the political and social elites, the artisans and craftsmen. First Nephi is impossible, with Lehi and his family carried off to Babylon, with Laban and the elders of the Jews exiled to Babylon, with the Brass Plates melted down and repurposed in Babylon, and very possibly with Ishmael and his family in Babylon as well. This is the

### Historical Verdict